

Alpine Plant Life

For decades, a ban on private vehicles has protected Mt. Norikura's remote alpine environment. The high peaks are carpeted with hardy mosses and flowering shrubs that survive sub-zero winter temperatures, intense UV exposure, gale-force winds, and a scarcity of fresh water. The moment the snows of winter begin to melt, the alpine plants of Mt. Norikura explode into life. The transition from snowbound landscape to verdant, flower-filled meadows occurs in barely a week's time.

Many alpine plant species are survivors from the last ice age, which ended roughly 11,000 years ago. As the global climate changed and the lowlands grew warmer, species that needed cool conditions were pushed to higher and higher elevations. Now, some of these species can only be found at extreme altitudes—mountaintops where the long winters and heavy snows still resemble an ice-age climate.

One of these rare alpine plants is a species of bleeding heart called *komakusa* (*Dicentra peregrina*). The Japanese name comes from the shape of its pink flowers, which are thought to resemble the head of a horse (*koma*). Tiny and fragile-seeming, the flowers and their feathery blue-gray foliage flourish in crevices on the rocky mountain slope.

Mineusuyukisō (*Leontopodium japonica*) is a graceful white cousin of edelweiss, symbol of the European Alps. Like edelweiss, it has furry white "petals" (actually modified leaves) that appear dusted with white powder—the origin of its name, which means "plant of light snow in the peaks."

Equally eye-catching are the fringed pink blooms of *koiwakagami* (*Schizocodon soldanelloides*), a name that means "small rock mirror" in reference to the plant's round, glossy leaves and rocky habitat. The white, bell-shaped flowers of the "moss peach" (*kokemomo*), better known in English as the lingonberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), are also easy to spot.

The best time to see alpine flowers is from July to early August, although the season runs until the end of September.